

important landscape scale restoration project in eastern Nevada, and establishes a national heritage route in eastern Nevada and western Utah.

Like similar legislation that we have worked on and passed for Clark County and Lincoln County, we do not expect anyone to endorse every title in this bill. When it comes to the topics of growth, conservation and stewardship in rural Nevada there are many strong and often opposing views. We believe that this legislation offers a solid middle ground and a path forward for the people of White Pine County.

In order to understand why this legislation is necessary, it is important to first put Nevada and White Pine County in context. Unlike most states in our Union, nearly nine out of every ten acres in Nevada are managed by Federal agencies. In White Pine County the number is even higher. Of the 5.7 million acres that make up White Pine County, 94 percent are managed by the Bureau of Land Management, BLM, the Forest Service, the National Park Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service Federal agencies.

This means that local decisions are not always local. Even the simplest land and stewardship decisions can involve multiple Federal land agencies, and the associated rules that come along with each agency. All too frequently, congressional action is needed to bridge the divide. This is a reality in many parts of the West, but in no place is it more true than in Nevada.

Moving beyond the borders of White Pine County, our legislation also makes essential changes to the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act that was first passed in 1998. This law has served Nevada well over the last 8 years, yet changes are needed to ensure that the legislation is able to meet the many and complex needs of our fast growing State. I will briefly describe each of these amendments, in addition to the other major titles of this legislation.

But before moving on to the specifics of each section of this bill, let me thank my colleagues for their willingness to work with us on this legislation. Senator ENSIGN and I have crafted this bill through a hands-on, ground level process that we think you will appreciate and support. Throughout this effort we have aspired to make well-reasoned, beneficial and necessary changes to land management in Nevada.

The first title in this bill creates a mechanism to increase the amount of privately held land in White Pine County. Currently, 94 percent of the land in the county is managed by Federal agencies. By increasing the total amount of private land in White Pine County, we create essential opportunities for growth and economic development that will also allow the county to provide greater support to its residents through an expanded tax base.

Our bill calls for up to 45,000 acres of land currently managed by the BLM to

be made available for sale in reasonable increments. Each year a portion of the total acreage will be made available for public auction after a joint selection is made by the county and the BLM. This system has worked well in Clark County and Lincoln County, and we believe that it will greatly enhance the ability of White Pine County to help plan and shape the long-term growth of its many communities. As part of the land sale authority, the county may elect to halt the annual disposal of land when and if appropriate.

Like the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act and the Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation and Development Act, this bill directs the Secretary of Interior to reinvest the proceeds from these land sales into essential Federal, State, and local environmental protection, infrastructure development, and recreational enhancements in the areas and communities where the lands are sold.

These funds also provide an additional revenue source for fulfilling the various mandates of this bill, including an off-highway vehicle trail study, designation of new wilderness areas, and the conveyance of lands into trust for tribal use.

In 1985 when I visited White Pine County to discuss possible wilderness designations in the Schell Creek and Currant Ranges and the north and south ends of the Snake Range, I heard from many local residents who opposed any effort to designate wilderness. Now in 2006, when I hear from the citizens of White Pine County they are most often strongly supportive of wilderness designation, particularly in the areas that they and their families have visited and cherished for generations.

I believe that much of this change can be attributed to the successful management of the Mt. Moriah and Currant Mountain wilderness areas, designated in 1989, where we were able to protect truly wild lands while still allowing hunting, grazing and other historical uses to continue. Equally important, many White Pine County residents have noted that as new waves of people discover the incredible backcountry of the Great Basin, the identification and protection of lands that are untouched by permanent development has become a priority.

Accordingly, in this bill we have identified roughly 545,000 acres for wilderness designation and the release of 67,000 acres of BLM wilderness study areas. We have benefited greatly from the careful suggestions of the White Pine County Commission, the Nevada Department of Wildlife, the Nevada Wilderness Project, hunters, ranchers, miners, Friends of Nevada Wilderness, and other White Pine County residents during this process.

We have worked to make careful decisions on the wilderness boundaries in this bill. Based on feedback from grazers and other users of the Mount Moriah wilderness area, a number of

boundary adjustments have been included to remove small pipelines and other encumbrances from the original wilderness area designated in 1989. We have also made careful choices like along the north end of Red Mountain where the wilderness boundary follows the banks of the White River so that a number of primitive campsites between the stream and a nearby road are excluded from the wilderness area.

While this proposal will surely be criticized as too conservative, others will see it as too expansive. Senator ENSIGN and I have both made important compromises to reach the proposal that we are presenting today and we stand by the middle ground that we have reached. We are committed to continue listening to all parties and taking into account their many and divergent needs.

The third title of this bill makes two important transfers of land between Federal agencies that will improve public land management in White Pine County. The first of these changes is a transfer of approximately 645 acres from the BLM to the Fish and Wildlife Service, FWS, to be managed as part of the Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge. This land became an inholding within the boundaries of the refuge after the Fish and Wildlife Service purchased the lands surrounding the BLM parcel in 2002. Management of this area by the Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge will improve oversight on the land and strengthen the holdings of this popular refuge.

Our legislation also transfers administrative jurisdiction of roughly 117,000 acres from the Forest Service to the BLM. These lands can be easily identified on a map as the donut shaped configuration of Forest Service land currently surrounding Great Basin National Park. Under the present arrangement, the Park Service, the Forest Service and the BLM manage an awkward patchwork of lands. In some areas, land managed by each of the three agencies can be found within a single linear mile. This division of management and labor makes proper stewardship of this area complicated and often times unworkable.

In addition to moving the identified lands to the BLM to improve management efficiency, we also withdraw roughly 50,000 acres of this land from mineral and land laws and require a management plan for the roads and trails through the area. These added protections will not only compliment Great Basin National Park and its mission, but will also ensure that popular hunting areas remain open and accessible. The additional 70,000 acres transferred to the BLM will be designated as the Highland Ridge Wilderness Area.

This title conveys land to expand two existing state parks and one state wildlife management area. The Charcoal Ovens State Park will receive approximately 650 acres of BLM land to expand its current holdings. The land to be conveyed is already managed by the